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ABSTRACT

Concerned that the present 2-year, compulsory, language program in secondary schools is unrealistic in the instructional objectives it asserts, the author proposes that a strong reading program be offered to interested students. Some discussion of current curricular problems, reading materials, and transfer of learning is made. The Ebacher Rapid Reading Format is claimed to allow first-year students to read six novels or plays in the target language and eight novels during the second year. Basic guidelines for a sound reading program are stated. (RL)

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I.

READING: THE THIRD DIMENSION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Among the many largesses distributed by psychology is the knowledge that in language learning at least four separate skills are needed for the acquisition of total fluency. While a significant shift of emphasis has taken place in the direction of verbal mastery, the skill of reading has become the step-child of modern foreign language teaching. The paucity of material available in our professional journals convinces us that it is so indeed. Yet our neglect of this vital aspect has an even more serious repercussion: the dwindling of enrollments on all levels. Because of our unrealistic goals in foreign language learning,[1] a large number of students shy away from our instructions and are forever lost to our cause. And these students, who have never been exposed to the lore of foreign culture and its language, are the ones who shall be sitting on boards of education denouncing language learning as "unnecessary frills" for which no funds can be authorized! A reassessment of our aims in foreign language learning is certainly warranted.

Although it cannot be denied that speech came first in the development and the transfer of human experience, the preservation and the transmission of all of our cultural and scientific knowledge was achieved through the written not the oral form. While current emphasis is placed on the spoken language, one should not lose sight of the fact that in a two-year language program--assuming, of course, that most high schools and colleges agree that a two-year program is at least desirable—the reality of mastering a foreign language in two years is remote. Students who are herded through a compulsory one or two-year program (and they still make up the bulk of our enrollment) have little to show once they are past that requirement. Since it is known that comparatively little transfer takes place from one skill to the other in foreign language learning,[2] one could assume, therefore, that when the oral approach is used, very few

students could or would pick up a book or magazine in a foreign language and digest its content. Oake shows that "oral approaches have not shown a fruitful increase of the mastery of a foreign language."[3] Since most of our high schools and colleges are limited to a two-year language program, it would seem desirable to make reading proficiency an objective in our curricula.

It would be idle to argue in favour of an exclusive reading program. An educated person ought to be proficient in all four facets of a foreign language; but equally, we cannot ignore the fact that a good reading program would benefit a great number of none language majors or minors. A reading program has many possibilities. It could be used to fulfill the humanities requirement. Government officials, businessmen, diplomats, librarians, candidates for M.A. and Ph. D. degrees, music majors, political scientists, sociologists, and ordinary citizens could benefit from such a program. These people do not view language learning as a way of life; they merely regard it as a practical tool which ought to be acquired in the shortest possible time. But thus far, our language departments have done little to broaden our offerings for people seeking a worthwhile but applicable skill. There ought to be a program in most schools for people who wish to acquire the ability to glean information from primary sources in a foreign language.

In view of the needs and the desirable goals of a large segment of students—a lasting ability to enjoy immediate access to primary information—what is actually being done to promote such a program? What methods are available? According to Meyerstein, many colleges offer reading courses which apportion but little extra time to reading alongside oral and cultural training. Most high schools and colleges do not even offer reading courses. Whatever category a particular school belongs to, the reason for rejecting or promoting a reading program can usually be found in three current dogmas. "The scientific dogma which underlies certain forms of language instructions in this country proclaims that 'writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks.' " The pedagogic dogma frequently justifies its methods with the maxim: "Vocalization is good for you!" Any language course must include a fair share of pronunciation and cultural information. Finally, the promotional dogma often proclaims: "Let the people decide!"[4]

Thus far a majority of reading-course promoters favor either the "direct" or the "intensive" approach. But aims and methods vary greatly. In the "direct" method practically all teachers have their

students read at an early stage in their language career.[5] The "intensive" method seeks to promote a wide familiarity with vocabulary and reading material rather than accuracy.[6] Recently, Ebacher has come out with a reading device which will enable the student to speed up his reading capacity and comprehension with the aid of a plastic grill which covers up interlinear vocabulary. By this method it is hoped to eliminate a student's time-loss in dictionary consulting.

The Ebacher Rapid Reading Format offers interlinear vocabulary which features only those words which a student would look up. Such words would occur for the first five times interlinear, then they would be dropped. Pilot studies at Xavier University have shown that by this method students average a 52% increase of material read and a 50% decrease in vocabulary recognition mistakes. It is claimed that if seven to eight interlinear repetitions would occur, a near total retention of vocabulary could be achieved.[7]

This approach to foreign language reading points out a great weakness in our current reading programs. Most readers feature a carefully controlled vocabulary. Recent studies on this subject have revealed that the cognitive vocabulary is much larger than previously suspected. "Seashore found the vocabulary of twelfth-grade students in the United States to be about 80,000 basic and derived words. He found that first graders know some 16,900 basic words. To think, then, of 2000 words as an adequate reading vocabulary in a foreign language is untenable. We must expand the vocabulary of our students if we expect them to read effectively."[8]

Ebacher's method makes it possible to read six novels or plays in the first year, and approximately eight books in the second year of instructions.[9] Oake advocates a series of graded readers with a vocabulary range of *circa* 4000 words.[10] Campbell, likewise, advocates graded readers, but he insists on simplified vocabulary. He deplores the many definitions found in standard dictionaries and advocates the use of a basic dictionary (for example, Pierre Fauré's *Premier Dictionnaire en Image)*, which explains but one term in the target language.[11]

No matter what method is used, there seems to be a general agreement to eliminate bilingual texts altogether. Translations and bilingual texts are viewed as having little pedagogical value. As Oake points out, in teaching students a "composition" grammar during a reading course is of comparatively little use.[12] Grammar, therefore, should be kept to an absolute minimum. The acquisition of grammatical patterns is achieved much better through reading than

through memorization of cumbersome rules.

In establishing a most efficient reading program, a few basic guidelines can be established. First, "to read is to grasp language patterns from their written representation. "[13] Second, the receptive skill of reading is much more easily acquired and more easily retained than any other skill in foreign language learning.[14] Third, the aim of any reading program should be the direct comprehension of the text. Fourth, "the common practice of having each student in succession read aloud a sentence or two to the class seems ineffective. "[15] Fifth, English should be banished from the reading process completely.

The direct and instantaneous comprehension of a text, involves the elaborate grasp of (1) visual images, and (2) of the thought unit.[16] Broken down further, this would mean a recognition of symbols–the vocabulary, idioms, and grammar of a foreign language. In developing a reading pattern, the factors of speed, newness and difficulty of vocabulary, structure, and the content of the material need to be considered. The selection and the amount of reading material is of primary importance and should be determined by the interest, need, and ability of the student. A safe guideline to follow is that the subject chosen must be worthwhile, interesting, and relevant to the student. In any case, quality should be more important than quantity. Intensive reading occurs in class and should prepare and stimulate extensive reading outside the classroom.

The paramount concern of the teacher should be to guide the student during the class period in such a manner that he may be able to continue effective reading on his own. To this end ten general rules are offered as suggestions:

1. Stimulate a favorable attitude toward the content of the material.
2. Introduce in advance vocabulary, constructions, and idioms which may be difficult.
3. Have students read the material several times.
4. Let the teacher's reading of a selected passage stimulate interest.
5. Have students keep a notebook in which they list key words and idioms.
6. Elicit meanings of unfamiliar terms by gesture, mimicry, simple drawings on board.
7. Have synonyms, antonyms, derivatives, and cognates noted.

8. Exercises on the material should precede or follow the reading but not interrupt it.
9. Explain differences of cognates.
10. Review each complete work for thought, content, idiom, and key vocabulary.[17]

Concerning the question of quality, there is a great satisfaction in realizing that in the middle of one's first or second year of language learning one is actually reading authentic texts. Instead the doctoring of works of art by bringing them down to the level of the student, it would be much better to prepare the student to understand and experience a particular piece of literature in its original form. No matter what language one reads–including one's own–most of that language learning is done through reading.[18]

Whatever personal preference one might have in teaching a reading course, each selected method should follow a consistent pattern which should adequately teach students to achieve the ultimate goal: the direct comprehension of the text. An effective reading program can give the student a lasting ability to read in a foreign language and might even generate a warmer feeling toward language learning than our current approach to foreign language learning in a compulsory two-year program.

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[1]George Klin, "Our Unrealistic Language Program," *FR*, XLII (1969); 722-727.

[2]Roger B. Oake, "Objective; Reading," *FR*, XXX (1957), 226.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 225.

[4]Rud S. Meyerstein, "Realism and Usefulness of Exclusive Reading," *MLJ*, XXXIX (1955), 85.

[5]Joseph P. Campbell, "A New Approach in Foreign Language Reading," *MLJ*, XLV (1961), 283.

[6]Oake, p. 228.

[7]Joseph P. Ebacher, "A New Approach in Foreign Language Reading," *MLJ*, XLV (1961), 165-166.

[8]Robert Lado, *Language Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1964), p. 140.

[9]Ebacher, *loc. cit.*

[10]Oake, p. 227.

[11]Campbell, *loc. cit.*

[12]Oake, p. 227.

[13]Lado, p. 132.

[14]Nelson Brooks, *Language and Language Learning,* 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), p. 167.

[15]Lado, p. 137.

[16]Louise C. Seibert & Lester G. Crocker, *Skills and Techniques for Reading French* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1958), pp. xiii-xv.

[17]Helen M. Duncan, "Reading a Foreign Language," *MLJ,* (1961), 18.

[18]Ebacher, pp. 166-167.